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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001866

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA'S DIVERSE CENTRAL PROVINCE  
HEADED FOR CLOSE ELECTION, BUT UNP LEADING

Classified By: DCM James F. Entwistle, for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

1. (C) Summary: On Poloff's October 23-26 trip to Sri Lanka's Central Province, interlocutors in the three districts of Nuwara Eliya, Kandy and Matale indicated that United National Party (UNP) candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe was slightly ahead of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party's (SLFP) Mahinda Rajapakse in the runup to a very close election. The views of voters in this ethnically diverse province could offer a good indication of how different ethnic and religious groups plan to vote in the election nationwide. Tamil dominated Nuwara Eliya has the most widespread UNP support, while Kandy will likely have a slight UNP majority and Matale's primarily Sinhalese residents are likely to vote in higher numbers for the SLFP. Police and government officials voiced confidence in a violence-free election, but party organizers in Kandy and Matale are concerned about voter intimidation and vote rigging. Our contacts observed that up to twenty percent of voters in the Central Province remain undecided, and suggested that both parties' house-to-house campaigns over the next three weeks will be crucial to the outcome. End Summary.

Nuwara Eliya: Tamils Want to Avoid War at any Cost  
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2. (C) Nuwara Eliya, the most southern of the Central Province's three districts, is largely comprised of approximately 1.5 million "up-country" Tamils of Indian origin who work on the tea plantations and support the UNP. In a meeting on October 24, former UNP Mayor of Nuwara Eliya S. Vivekananthan explained to Poloff that the three most important issues to up-country Tamils are the lack of land rights, opportunities for education and health facilities. He noted that most up-country Tamils plan to vote UNP because Ranil Wickremesinghe promised in his manifesto to "banish current land permits and give the land to Tamil occupants," while Mahinda Rajapakse is perceived as anti-minority. He recalled that historically eighty-one percent of the district's residents come out to vote, and predicted that seventy percent of voters would support the UNP. At a meeting with Nuwara Eliya's NGO leaders, Ms. Ranji Stubbs from MENCAFEP, an NGO that assists mentally handicapped children, added that Rajapakse's pact with the Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) raised concerns among the otherwise election-weary plantation workers that an SLFP victory would ruin the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA). "Plantation Tamils don't know the details of the peace process," Stubbs reflected, "but if they think that there is even a one percent chance that Rajapakse could take the country back to war, then they will vote UNP."

3. (C) Most of the up-country Tamils traditionally belong to the Ceylon Worker's Congress (CWC), a labor union-based political party purportedly fighting for the rights of plantation workers, which has pledged to support Ranil Wickremesinghe. Interlocutors in the area described how corruption in the party and disappointment in the leadership of Arumugan Thondaman, the grandson of the CWC founder, are leading an increasing number of workers to join the splinter Ceylon Worker's Alliance (CWA) and the Up-Country People's Front (UPF). The CWA has supported the SLFP since it came to power in 2000, and General Secretary S. Sathasivam predicted that approximately ten to fifteen percent of up-country Tamils will vote for the SLFP in the presidential election. The CWA broke away from the Congress because of political problems with the UNP and personal differences with Thondaman, but Sathasivam highlighted President Kumaratunga's role in starting the Plantation Infrastructure Ministry and looking after the plight of the up-country Tamils over the last six years. M. Lawrence, Vice President for the UPF, told Poloff that his party supports the UNP because of Wickremesinghe's position on devolution of power to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and his promise to consider "giving up-country Tamils a larger role in the peace process." He estimated that the CWC's membership has decreased to 60,000 union members, which has increased UPF support to almost 40,000. Commenting on the rise of the UPF, Palm Foundation representative Saman ijebandara worried that revolutionary Tamil youth in the area are joining the group because they sympathize with the LTTE, which has close UPF connections.

Kandy: Minorities and Urban Sinhalese Prefer UNP  
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4. (SBU) In Kandy District, representatives of both minorities and urban Sinhalese voters in the area were (perhaps overly) confident of a UNP victory. Kandy has approximately 900,000 voters,

comprised of about 73 percent Sinhalese Buddhist, 11 percent Tamil, 13 percent Muslim and 3 percent Christian. Urban voters tend to support the pro-business UNP, and can afford to be more focused on the peace process. Kandy CWC organizer Mathi Yuga Rajah emphasized that Rajapakse's electoral pact with the JVP and JHU was turning off swing voters, and invigorating the UNP base. Attorney Harindra Dunuwille, former Mayor of the Municipal Council and MP for Kandy District, added that President Kumaratunga is sacrificing SLFP unity by publicly criticizing the JVP, questioning the direction of her party's campaign, and withholding full support for Rajapakse's campaign. SLFP supporters in Kandy may not switch their vote to the UNP, he predicted, but they won't come out to vote in strong numbers for their candidate, rendering SLFP support among the Sinhalese in Kandy relatively weak. Lakshman Perera, pastor of one of the largest churches in Kandy, said that Christians were very concerned about the rising influence of JVP and JHU power, which could turn Rajapakse into a "puppet in JVP hands." "Sri Lanka's Christians care most about maintaining peace, and will vote for the UNP," he concluded.

#### Matale: UNP Will Divide the Country and Cut Welfare Benefits

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15. (C) Matale District residents are primarily Sinhalese farmers and traders, a strong base for the SLFP, and are focused on economic issues. In contrast to the South, where voters are more confident in the UNP's ability to reduce the cost of living, the "average man" in Matale is concerned about the future of the Samurdhi Welfare Program. SLFP and UNP organizers estimate that between forty and fifty percent of Matale residents receive a monthly stipend of up to 1000 Sri Lanka Rupees (10 USD) from the Samurdhi program. Both the SLFP and UNP promise to increase benefits, but Wickremesinghe also plans to change the name of the program to Siya Saviya (self-sufficiency). Saliya Dayananda, a UNP organizer in the Dambulla electorate in Matale, regretted that the name change has created a perception among farmers that Ranil will change the program completely, including cutting benefits. He speculated that this could be "the deciding issue" for voters in the region, and called the name change the biggest political blunder of the UNP campaign. Capitalizing on this incorrect perception, Dambulla's SLFP Secretary of the Central Committee Jayathilake stressed that his

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party is reminding villagers in their house to house campaign that when Ranil became Prime Minister in 2001, he cut benefits for the Samurdhi Welfare Program.

16. (C) Although the peace process is less of a priority in Matale than in areas in the north and east, SLFP organizers around the district asserted that Mahinda's pact with the JVP and JHU is not a liability because villagers fear the UNP is too soft on the LTTE and are increasingly supportive of the JVP. According to SLFP Provincial Council Member Dhammika Angammana, in the 2001 General Elections, the JVP received almost 20,000 of the 210,000 Matale district votes (compared to 89,000 for the SLFP and 100,000 for the UNP). He explained that JVP support since then has increased because people are losing confidence in politicians from the two major parties. SLFP campaigners are stressing the need to maintain a unitary state, and spreading the fear that if Ranil becomes president, he will "divide the country." SLFP and UNP interlocutors confirmed the widespread public perception that Ranil is too soft on the LTTE. With 500 village level committees and 25 cadres in each committee to spread the news, Matale SLFP Provincial Council Member W. M. Yasamana plans to take this message to every house in Matale within the next three weeks.

#### Prospects for Election Violence in Kandy and Matale

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17. (C) Police and election officials around the Central Province expressed confidence that the elections would be free of violence, but unofficial interlocutors remained worried about voter intimidation and vote rigging. Kandy experienced the worst election violence in recent years when the then-SLFP Deputy Defense Minister was accused of killing 10 Muslim voters during the 2001 General Elections. Nimal Mediwaka, the Deputy Inspector General for the Central Province, admitted that previous elections have been "a battlefield," but reported no election violations in the 2004 General Elections. According to Mediwaka, the improvement is due to the creation of the independent National Police Commission, which has curbed the impartiality and abuses of previous elections. In an October 23 meeting, Central Province police and party representatives said they were committed to working for free and fair elections. Mediwaka cited this as proof of a "changed attitude," and he plans to continue holding the meetings on a weekly basis until the elections to sort out any concerns.

18. (C) Nevertheless, UNP supporters and organizers in Kandy and Matale, including former President of the Bar Association in Kandy Shaul Maharooof, worried about the likelihood of SLFP vote rigging and voter intimidation. Pastor Lakshman claimed that the SLFP has circumvented election laws by placing teachers

who support the SLFP in polling places to overlook irregularities and sending party activists to UNP stronghold villages to intimidate voters. Traders at a local marketplace called the Dambulla Economic Center were hesitant to discuss their views out of fear that word would get back to "thuggish" SLFP MP Janaka Bandara Tennekoon, the current Minister of Provincial Councils and Local Government. Most traders publicly stated they would vote SLFP, but interestingly one SLFP "supporter" caught up with POL FSN after the meeting in the public market to quietly explain that most of the traders wanted Ranil to win, but were worried about the repercussions if they were branded UNP supporters.

Comment: Where you Stand Depends Upon Where you Live

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19. (U) While minority support for the UNP is no surprise, interlocutors around the province believe that Wickremesinghe has taken a slight lead since October and that Rajapakse's campaign will continue to suffer from his JVP/JHU pact. Anytime our contacts extrapolated their analysis to the country, Ranil usually came out slightly ahead, but all admitted that it is too close to call and that many voters will decide in the next three weeks. Despite the stark choices the two main candidates offer on the peace process and economy, many of our interlocutors in Central Province observed that up to 20 percent of voters remain undecided. When asked about the deciding factor, analysts predicted that up-country Tamils will go with the historical tendency to "vote for the elephant" (the UNP symbol), Kandyans will support Ranil to continue the peace process, and Matale villagers will fight for the SLFP to save their monthly handout and keep the island intact.

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